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The Arousal Of Passions: Mob Rhetoric As An Antebellum Political Device

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Review

THE AROUSAL OF PASSIONS

Mob rhetoric as an antebellum political device

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Smith, Kimberly K. *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason, & Romance in Antebellum Politics*. University Press of Kansas, ISBN 700609571

The Dominion of Voice is an intelligent study in the character of democratic politics before the Civil War, challenging the ideal that reasoned argument is the healthiest means to resolve political conflict. The underlying issue in the book is anti-slavery. Instead of viewing passion as an unhealthy feature of the political landscape, the author contends, we should recognize the enduring role of public protest and the power of sympathy that emerged from slave narratives such as those of the persuasive orator Frederick Douglass.

The book is divided into distinct sections that are intriguing in themselves but do not meld well. The first examines the history of mob action in America, categorizing the colonial scene effectively. Street actions were considered a legitimate feature of political discourse, a means of declaring community sentiment without entirely dismantling the system of authority and deference. That is, mobs were neither dismissed as uncivil outbursts, nor simply construed along rigid class lines. In the 19th century, resistance became more disorderly and merely partisan. Rioters targeted the opposition's public "voice": printing presses, meeting halls, elections.

Neoclassical rhetoric and political oratory is the focus of Kimberly Smith's second section, which highlights the disruptive power of speech. Frances Wright and Angelina Grimk demonstrated the shock value of passionate appeals in furthering the cause of moral reform. Rhetoricians whose definitions mattered -- Hugh Blair and John Quincy Adams -- instructed antebellum orators how they were to make their ideas felt. Speakers were thought to conquer the will through enchanting tones and mannerisms; mesmerism reduced subjects to a pliable state.

A final section of the book mingles storytelling with appeals to "feeling," as sympathy trumps reasoned argument. How did people judge the truth or falsehood of abolitionists' claims? Here Frederick Douglass and the fictional Uncle Tom are ultimate examples of sublime storytelling and spiritual strength, who effected a quasi-religious "conversion" and made it hard to "look the other way" on slavery.

The Dominion of Voice is a provocative read. Smith at times oversimplifies, for example, too starkly contrasting the orderly features of the 18th century with the violence of the 19th century. The common thread in this interesting if uneven effort to categorize the historical nature of open resistance is the importance of the arousal of passions to achieve political ends. Reason, the author insists, is the rhetorical (but not the real American) solution to the central issues in history. Traditional mobs were closer to rallies and parades than most historians credit, and the spirit underlying vocal abolitionism, while considered "inflammatory" by antebellum Southerners, possessed positive value in legitimating the slave narrative and a distinctly American power in championing the rights of all.

Andrew Burstein is author of Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image (1999) and The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist (1995).